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Opinion

## **Pulse of The People: Use the King Street demo as motivation**

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The recent demolition of 4 - 10 King St. reminds us again of the love we have for our architecture, history, gateways and streetscape. It also reminds us of the many costs of neglect. The demolition is a great opportunity for a wake-up call. If our buildings are indeed important to us, let us ensure that our policies, procedures, budget and actions accurately reflect that.

I propose a Citizens Working Group on Vacant Buildings and Land Value Taxation.

The city Council has already implemented two Citizen Working Groups: one on compost and one on alternative transportation. The Compost Working Group convened in the summer of 2012 and consisted of five non-paid citizens who researched and crafted a report on recommendations, costs and benefits for how the city could deal with its organics in the waste stream. The report was delivered in January 2013 at the Technology and Sustainability Committee to a packed Council chambers full of enthusiasm and support for such a display of participatory democracy. The results of their work will be felt and reaped long into the future.

The effects can already be seen every Saturday at the Farmers Market collecting kitchen food scraps. The full five gallon pails then travel out to homestead farms and return much needed nutrients to the soil for our future food. There is also a cost benefit. All food that is diverted from the trash is money the city saves on dumping it in the landfill. If all our organics were kept out of the landfill, it is estimated that the City of Troy would save about \$400,000 per year.

A second result is the successful submittal of a grant application to New York State Energy Research and Development Authority that would begin in January and would finance a two-year pilot program for residential and commercial food scrap pick-up. This experience would give us more information and help us determine how we want to deal with our food scraps into the future.

The success of the Citizens Working Group on Composting gave an idea to local planning and transportation enthusiasts who successfully encouraged the city Council to create a Citizens Working Group on Alternative Transportation. As far as I know, Mayor Lou Rosamilia just needs to make appointments, and this group can officially start their work and contribution.

TRIP's Troy Neighborhood Action Council has helped organize and maintain a Vacant Properties Working Group that has met now for years and is full of experience, knowledge and ideas. (Its next meeting will be Sept. 18, 6 to 7:30 p.m., location TBD.) I suggest the Council create a Citizens Working Group on Vacant Properties and ask the group to put together a formal report with recommendations to the city. Until that report is created, I suggest Rosamilia establish a temporary board to advise the city.

I see the Citizen Working Group model as a fantastic way to get a variety of important research, recommendations and work accomplished. Our city is full of fabulous people with ideas and creativity. Let's call on those ideas and that creativity.

Besides creating a Citizens Working Group on Vacant Properties, we can also look into adopting land value taxation.

We just spent millions of dollars to reassess every property in the city, and I know it has caused great hardship for many. Our current method of determining property tax is outdated. It penalizes through increased taxes those who maintain and improve their property. It also rewards through lower taxes those who neglect their property. Land value taxation is a different approach to taxing property. It only looks at the land and its location and ignores the structures on the land. This approach is much easier to do fairly. It is far easier to determine the fair value of a piece of land (it can't be all that much different from the value per square foot of the properties on either side of it) than to equitably determine the value of a building, and much, much easier to update those values over time. And you cannot then lower the taxes on your building by allowing it to degrade. LVT works with zoning to encourage dense development in our downtown and neighborhood centers. People are encouraged to create value in the buildings, and everyone benefits. It has been very successful in many parts of Pennsylvania, including Harrisburg. Check it out.

Rather than go back to sleep until we lose another building, let us use the loss of 4 - 10 King St. as motivation to take the actions necessary to prevent more such losses.

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